



From custom-made to homemade

Once known for its made-to-order worsted yarn, the Bernon Worsted Mill is being renovated into 20 condominiums.

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WOONSOCKET -- It's easy to miss it -- the tired warehouse on Park Avenue with the bad paint job and the boarded-up windows.

In another time, it was a thriving textile mill, known for its high-end, custom-made yarns. But these days, it just looks worn out.

That is, until you go inside.

Under the ceilings where mill workers once spun yarn, construction workers are now hammering new life into the old structure.

Built in 1919, the Bernon Worsted Mill is the latest addition to the city's growing list of mill-to-residence rehabilitation projects. Marketed under the name Red Mill Lofts, the new condominiums -- 20 in total -- will range from airy one-bedroom units to lofted two-bedroom units, with oversized windows and exposed brick walls. The units are expected to sell for close to \$200,000 and above.

But unlike Woonsocket's other mill redevelopment projects, this one won't be sold as a luxury-living alternative for Boston and Providence residents.

Owner and developer Ernie Nadeau said he hopes to attract local professionals and "empty-nesters" who are looking for a hip new place to live.

For years before he bought the Park Avenue building, Nadeau said he'd been looking for a development project like this one. When he came across the Bernon Mill 11 months ago, it was a perfect match -- a large, structurally sound mill complex with a lot of potential. He snapped it up.

There was an added bonus: the place had a unique history.

Back when the mills that flanked the Blackstone River were busy mass-producing lower-grade wool and other textiles, the Bernon Worsted Mill specialized in smaller batches of made-to-order worsted yarn, used in the fine-weave French worsted processes that took place in other mills around the city.

Just this week, officials announced that the mill will be added to the National Register. It's the fifth building statewide added this year.

"Architecturally, it was a fairly straightforward mill, but it had this one particular niche aspect going on that was important and it was so much smaller than a lot of the other complexes," said Jeff Emidy, who helped prepare the National Register application for the state's Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission.

The new designation will make the building eligible for historical tax credits, which Nadeau said will help curb costs as the project enters its final stages.

The site should not be confused with the Bernon Mills Estates commercial property off Front Street, Emidy warned. According to the Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, that property was actually built by the Russell Manufacturing Co. and was later purchased by The Woonsocket Co. in 1932. The name Bernon was simply added for marketability, because the complex is in the city's Bernon section.

As for the Bernon Worsted Mills, Nadeau said he plans to have most units completed by October and hopes to start selling them once the legal ends have been tied up. In the meantime, he's finished and furnished one unit which is available for open house tours.

Of the 20 available units, Nadeau said he has "strong commitments" for about half.

"I think Woonsocket was one of the last vestiges in the Southern New England region where you can find stuff like this at a fairly reasonable price," he added.

But as the number of spruced-up mills hitting Woonsocket's real-estate market grows each month, some have speculated that market saturation may be looming on the horizon.

Nadeau, for his part, said he's given up trying to assess the odds and has instead focused on making his mill as marketable as possible. "If I knew the answer to that question, I'd be a lot richer than I am," he said. "Who knows when and if the demand will exhaust itself."

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